Tolkien: From Beowulf to Bilbo and Beyond

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Introduction

Since his birth in 1892, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien walked many paths during his life, which led him to be known as an author, a linguist, an academic and a mythologist, along with less career-orientated factions denoting him as a soldier, a Roman Catholic and a father. Therefore, it beggars logic to isolate the attributes of Tolkien's multiplexed career, such that suitable references can be made in retrospect, highlighting the points in his life that pay dividends to the man as he is known today.

The Early Years

Following his father's death in 1896, Tolkien relocated to the UK from South Africa to live with his mother, and it was here in the rural suburbs of Birmingham that he was raised alongside a linguistic timetable, which resulted in his pre-adolescent command of Latin and Greek. Inspiration was abundant at the same time in view of his subsequent works; such musings taken from the onset of industrialisation, the premature demise of his mother and even the Welsh coal trucks that frequented the rail lines adjacent to the family home.

During his teenage years, the orphaned Tolkien was frequently shadowed by Father Morgan, who had previously remained central to the family. Being the priest to the local Roman Catholic community, it was inevitable that Tolkien would be subject to the bonds of chastity and the associated curfews that would procure what Morgan deemed to be a "potential intellectual prodigy" (Wood, 2012). However, despite these efforts, Tolkien maintained that the relationship he had previously held with his teenage sweetheart was of moral validity and on the eve of his departure for service duty cemented his intentions towards Edith Bratt in their marriage in 1916; all of which following successful completion of his degree from Exeter College at Oxford.

Due to the onset of trench fever, Tolkien's regimental stint was short lived, but despite a premature conclusion, he gleaned further inspiration from his experiences, the likes of which would take seed in the pages of his fiction that followed. It was on his return and subsequent recovery that his professional career began.

Tolkien the Academic

It was in the summer of 1920 that Tolkien took up the post of Reader in English Language at Leeds University, which five years later led him to a Rawlinson and Bosworth Professorship back at Oxford. This post complimented his existing knowledge of Anglo-Saxon heritage and Old English, and occupied the following twenty years of his academic career. It was here at Oxford that Tolkien founded a literary gathering known as the *Coalbiters*, whose members would meet regularly to read Icelandic and other Northern myths. This group later migrated to become the more renowned *Inklings*; the members of whom included the likes of CS Lewis, Charles Williams and other notable poets, authors and theologians. The Inklings would meet at a public house of choice to discuss narratives and poetry, but moreover to offer critical analysis of works in progress authored by its members. Continuing to meet into the early 1950's, the same group played host to the unveiling of works such as Lewis' *"Out of the Silent Planet"*, *"The Problem of Pain"*, and Tolkien's own *"The Lord of the Rings"*.

A further notable moment of Tolkien's career came in 1936 when he gave an outspoken delivery to the "stuffed shirts" (Merry, 2002) of the British Academy. Rooted in his studies of Anglo-Saxon literature, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* addressed criticism of the associated work that focused on the text being a viewport to Anglo-Saxon society, and in so-doing downplaying the intrinsic elements of the mythology. It is here that we clearly see Tolkien's defence for the narrative woven into such literature; something of which can be perceived as a pre-emptive strike to those who would make it

their interest to pass similar judgement on his own works. Solopova delivers a number of anecdotes in *Languages, Myths and History* that pairs Tolkien's fiction to comparable historic events, and in turn it would seem logical that he would strive to maintain the focus of his audience, so as to appreciate the mythology which lay beneath such influences. Therefore, it would come of no surprise that it was an ever-present concern of Tolkien that his long-established Middle-earth folklore would be misconstrued as a mere vehicle to his plotlines.

On Fairy-Stories followed three years later acting as a further persuasive study of building mythologies to accompany the narrative of the same genre. The focus of this work encourages the notion of a fictitious world existing in its own laws, whilst being fully realised - and done so in an attempt to dispel any doubt of the reader, resulting in what Tolkien terms as being an "inner consistency of reality" (Tolkien, 1986: 88). Maintaining this theme, he acknowledges the reality of death and destruction akin to such writing, but with the token positive twist in the tale. This sequence of events being better known to the Tolkien reader as a "eucatastrophic" quality, which sees a tragic set of events resulting in an eventual joyous outcome; Tolkien's favourite example being the death and resurrection of Christ, or "an echo of evangelium in the real world" as it is referred to in the aforementioned lecture (Tolkien, 2006: 155).

Continuing his post at Oxford, Tolkien changed his chair to that of the Merton Professorship of English Language and Literature in 1945, and remained at the faculty for a further fourteen years. It was during these years that Tolkien rekindled an interest for his own fictional writing; something of which he had long before been preparing. This work was not only acknowledged by his peers during the aforementioned evenings spent in mutual admiration of fictional works, but was equally evident during his youth having been exposed daily to an inherent family interest in linguistics.

Tolkien the Linguist

It was in his early teenage years that Tolkien gave interest to what is known to be his first experience of an invented language. Created by his cousins, Tolkien addressed *Animalic* in his essay *A Secret Vice*, highlighting its frivolous nature that replaced simple grammatical vernacular with names of varying species; the sample below translating as "You are an Ass" (Tolkien, 2006:200).

" *Dog nightingale woodpecker forty* "

Following the termination of Animalic, attention was turned to a more challenging syntax known as *Nevbosh*, or "new nonsense". Again created by an auxiliary family member, Tolkien again took interest and contributed to the vocabulary and spelling (Tolkien, 2006:203). Whilst the majority of what we can decipher from the remaining Nevbosh script appears to be a purposeful misconstruction of English and Latin vocabulary, we also notice the early onset of Welsh influence. The use of the letter /y/ in monosyllabic words for example, and its position adjacent to consonants that consequently brands the letter as an unstressed schwa (see examples "*fys*" and "*ym*" below). This same influence was later adopted in the Elvish languages written by Tolkien, with the aforementioned unstressed schwa also given its own character in the associated Tengwar writing systems. This single script is again found in the aforementioned essay, with the adjacent translation as it appears in Carpenter's Biography (Carpenter, 2000).

Dar fys ma vel gom co palt 'hoc	*There was an old man who said 'how*
pys go iskili far maino woc?	*can I possibly carry a cow?*
Pro si go fys do roc de	*For if I was to ask it*
Do cat ym maino bocte	*To get in my pocket*
De volt fac soc ma taimful gyróc!'	*It would make such a fearful row!'*

It was then, having become part of a literary club at the King Edwards School in Birmingham, that Tolkien wrote his first language. *Naffarin* was an a priori phonetic study of Latin and Spanish, the lexicon of which containing words

from the aforementioned Nevbosh; some pertaining to *Qenya* that evolved shortly after. Very little is known of Naffarin in terms of its surviving wordlist, however it is noticed that even at this early stage in his hobby as a linguist, Tolkien was exploiting what he believed to the more suited phonetic attributes of the predicated languages, and as such removed phonemes and digraphs accordingly. Such examples are known to include /w/, /wh/, /th/ and /sh/, and as shown in the one remaining script (Tolkien, 2006:209);

> **"** *O Naffarínos cutá vu navru cangor luttos ca vúna tiéranar, dana maga tíer ce vru encá vún' farta once ya merúta vúna maxt' amámen.* **"**

Ironically it was the same phonemes that Tolkien removed from his early linguistic works that were then favoured by in the languages that followed. His later Elvish work inherently using soft mutations, such as those found in colloquial Welsh morphology, in which we find voiced plosives replaced with fricatives as well as aspirated consonants and nasal mutations used to further soften the harsher sounds associated with the aforementioned Naffarin.

In the years that followed, Tolkien continued to elaborate and evolve the Elvish languages; *Quenya* and *Sindarin* arguably becoming the flagships of his linguistic achievements given their lexical diversity and expanse of content. Furthermore, it was his intent to construct a meaningful background to encompass his languages, insisting that languages themselves presupposed a mythology. It is often the case that we see this predication realised in its opposite, whereby the narrative or dialogue has adopted to the subject matter. As a consequence, this may often leave the reader juxtaposed between the real world and the "associated" constructed language. The extract from Tolkien's letters below clearly stating his intention towards the potential of such ambiguity (Carpenter, 1985:219);

> **"** *[A] primary 'fact' about my work, that it is all of a piece, and fundamentally linguistic in inspiration… The invention of language is the foundation. To me a name comes first and the story follows.* **"**

Whilst it was in his interest to promote a background of legend and mythology in his writing, it was also Tolkien's intention to utilise a lexicon that would endorse a similar significance. In the aforementioned On Fairy-Stories lecture, Tolkien concentrates on opinions that would incriminate modern English of diluting a once suitable language for this purpose. Taking the Latin influence as an example, we notice the word *spiritus* carries a simultaneous definition of wind, breath and spirit, whereas the anglicised equivalent, *spirit*, is somewhat one-dimensional by comparison. Tolkien recognised the significance that such words have on a narrative pertaining to mythological context and subsequently looked to embrace this concept through his own writing - the same literal creativity being further exasperated in the creation of his Elvish tongues.

As his career at Oxford progressed into the 1930's, and given his writings at the time were authored so with no intention of publication, Tolkien made a decision to branch into the realms of the fictional writer in the fond hope that his subsequent written works would act as a medium through which his languages could be given the recognition that in previous years they had failed to achieve.

Tolkien the Author

A lot of what we digest from Tolkien's written work leaves us with an imprint of the impetus behind his writing, but furthermore gives an insight into the man himself; his beliefs, his morals and his passions. From the moment he took residence in the suburbs of industrialised Birmingham, Tolkien's inspiration began to stir. It was these images, along with his experiences in the trenches of the First World War that arguably gave rise to the twist of reality we find in his fiction; examples of which can be seen from the uprising against Morgoth and the fall of Gondolin among others. The metaphors of his own reality rarely go unnoticed by Tolkien biographers, and something of which was commented on by Roger Luckhurst in a series of lectures defending

Tolkien's grasp of what has since become known as "real-world" fiction (Luckhurst, 2008).

" Tolkien's Lord of the Rings was a book conceived and worked over initially in the trenches of the First World War. The Orcs mass in territories that bear startling resemblances to No-Man's Land, where most of his friends and comrades were killed "

A further example of real-world fiction is highlighted in the uprising of Isengard, where we read of Fangorn Forest being cut down to stoke the fires responsible for Sauron's creations. Tolkien's intense passion for the environment was frequently exasperated during interviews in which he would declare his admiration for nature, including his desire for communication with trees, hence the speaking Ent-folk of the aforementioned Fangorn Forest. Furthermore was his concern for the onset of industrialisation that saw him favouring the bicycle as a means of transport, and vow to never make use of a motor vehicle following the end of the Second World War.

One of the more intriguing points of his life as an author was in 1928 when Tolkien was said to write in a blank area in a student's paper, the phrase "in a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit". The inspiration for this literary claim is unknown, however further elaboration of the statement occurred, drawing on knowledge of Arthurian legends, tales of Middle Age chivalry and mythology, in the form of folk-tales that Tolkien would read to his children. It was during the nine years that followed that Tolkien wrote sufficient material to be considered for publication. Then with the aid of a student who had convenient connections to a publisher (later to become Harper Collins), Tolkien saw *"The Hobbit"* printed in September of 1937; the first run being sold out by Christmas of the same year (Tolkien Collector, 2003).

Following the success of The Hobbit, Tolkien then prepared more of his legendarium into what he referred to as *"Quenta Silmarillion"* for the same publisher; this however being rejected due to its "telephone-directory dullness" (Wood, 2012). Then rising to the challenge, he came back with The

Lord of the Rings which was published in three volumes during 1954-55. Criticism followed both in positive and negative form, but despite this reached its fame in the mid 1960's when the books entered the impulse buying category in the form of a paperback, having previously discovered the hardback edition becoming subjected to a pirated paperback edition on the cheaper, albeit illegal, publishing black market.

Tolkien's career then became something of a tale that grew in the telling as there was no knowing where this new found fame would take him. However, from the musings of the Tolkien Society (shown below - Doughan, 2012) and recollections of his son, Simon Tolkien, we are told of the loss of a once enthusiastic and passion-filled correspondence with those that had taken an interest in his work. Inappropriately time phone calls from trans-continental fanatics demanding underhand knowledge of sequels, coupled with graffiti taking place in obscure places led Tolkien to move to Bournemouth, miles away from his Oxford home. With all things considered, he felt compelled to refrain from giving interviews or attending award ceremonies, and thus surrendered to a life of solitude.

> *"[F]ans were causing increasing problems; both those who came to gawp at his house and those, especially from California who telephoned at 7pm (their time, 3am his), to demand to know whether Frodo had succeeded or failed in the Quest, what was the preterite of Quenyan lanta, or whether or not Balrogs had wings..."*

Tolkien also felt obligated to make this personal recoil a mark of respect to his wife, who had submitted herself to be forever trailing in the intellectual dust kicked up by his friends. However, despite making contact with his academic associates more difficult, this retreat meant that the remainder of his life could be spent continuing his unfinished works from Middle-earth. He was also awarded an honorary Doctorate for his work in philology from the University of Liège, along with an OBE in the New Year's Day honours in 1972. However, it was following these recognitions that Tolkien fell victim to pneumonia, and in realising the inevitable outcome of the illness he appointed his son

Christopher (who had become something of an expert in his father's fictional studies) to be his literary executor. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien died in the September that same year of 1973.

The Continuation of a Literary Legend

It was following Tolkien's passing that Christopher spent twenty-five years away from the media continuing his father's works, which later saw the publishing of *"The Silmarillion"*, the *"Unfinished Tales"* and twelve volumes detailing the history of Middle-earth. Those well read on the subject will have come to realise that Middle-earth goes far beyond that which the books would have us believe to be a mere backdrop to the narrative. This fictitious continent and the surrounding lands of Arda come complete with a pre-visualised creation story along with an initial fall and resurrection; something of which one might attribute to the religious views held in high regard by Tolkien.

More recently the launch of Peter Jackson's "*The Lord of the Rings*" trilogy released over two years from 2001, has paved the way for a new generation of Tolkien fanatics, with the introduction of a medium which the youth of today can associate with. However, despite the resulting success of the films, Jackson's work was carried out against the will of Christopher who argued his case based on the understanding that his father's written word delivers more of the intended mythology. Whilst it can be deemed a benefit that film and television have opened a new dimension in which to experience fictional worlds, it can still be appreciated that this comparatively passive approach may dilute the potential effect that the narrative may have on its audience. Whilst such a line of questioning may only be accurately recorded on a case-by-case basis, it can still be argued that the absence of Tom Bombadil, along with the surrounding Old Forest and Withywindle Valley from Jackson's trilogy dilutes not only elements of the narrative, but also the history of Middle-earth.

Christopher Tolkien later made it his interest to pursue a legal battle against New Line Cinema concerning unpaid royalties for the film trilogy. The successful result of which saw the Tolkien Estate awarded with substantial funds that have since allowed the trustees of the Estate to further their charitable interests. This same matter of litigation initially hindered the proposed production of Jackson's second instalment of The Hobbit, but the conclusion of which permitted its continuation, having reached a mutual state which agreed that all parties involved would *"look forward to a mutually productive and beneficial relationship in the future"* (Soury, 2009).

Despite the arguments for and against the popularity of Tolkien's continuing success, it is nonetheless the shared opinion that his work as an author prevails above all and undoubtedly pertains as the reason for the future interest of works that may follow. As Ross Smith so aptly concludes in his paper *Timeless Tolkien* (Smith, 2005);

> **"** *[H]is gift as a teller of tales is the fundamental reason for his popularity and continued success. Social concerns fluctuate over the year, or even over months, but a good read is eternal* **"**

Equally important, moreso to academics and readers, was Tolkien's desire to make every attempt to bypass the notion that would see the phonetic nature of words being purely arbitrary. The delineation of how well a word fits its subject was measured on what Tolkien called "phonetic fitness" (Tolkien, 2006:206) and that the main source of pleasure comes directly from the relationship between the sound and notion of a word. It is therefore of great interest to those in such fields that research is being undertaken to attribute the sounds of our language with their once-true meaning and in turn restore the empathy that it shares with our environment. This being yet another means by which *Tolkienania* is being kept alive, and considering his life-long projection of unravelling linguistic aesthetics, arguably the most appealing for the late JRR Tolkien.

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